

Freedom and Fire! A Civil War Story

Music by Amir Zaheri, Libretto by Robin Behn.

Summary of the plot:

In the last few days of the Civil War, the young student-cadets of a southern university—recently turned into a military school—complain of meager rations, sleepless nights on guard duty, homework, and dread of the approaching Union army. They are summoned to roll call, “pray” for deliverance (and bacon!), and are admonished by their sympathetic commander-professors. That night, Union troops with “fifteen hundred horses” and their black Union scout, an escaped slave who “grew up here where my mother was taken,” find the bridge over the river and cross into the town. In the guardhouse on campus, two cadets and a slave – a fife-and-drum musician who reflects on being “Sold!” to “this so-called university”—do guard duty. A messenger arrives with news of the Union invasion. A long drum roll summons the cadets into battle.

Meanwhile, close by in town, a young Confederate captain engaged to a local girl decides that the wedding must happen immediately before the violence. Hurried preparations, joyful dancing, and a quick wedding take place before the groom is suddenly dragged away by invading soldiers.

The cadets, far outnumbered, their cannons captured, retreat to a hill above the river. From moonrise to sunrise, their Colonel and University president—to whom “all the boys look like my own boy”—grieve their fate. Then they see, in the distance, the whole campus burning.

The Union colonel approaches the library with orders to burn it, but is challenged by the librarian. The Colonel sends a messenger to find out if he must go through with the order. Soldiers enter the observatory, ogle over the big lenses, and set the place on fire. These marauding “thieves of stars” are chased off by the observatory keeper who takes her orders “directly from God.” The messenger returns with bad news: the library must be burned. But the book-loving Colonel allows the librarian to save one book. He chooses a rare illustrated Koran. The chorus warns of fury, penance....

At the height of the destruction, the President’s wife makes her heroic stand, ordering the soldiers to put out the “blood-colored flames” burning down the President’s mansion. She recalls tender family moments in the mansion while, below her in the basement, her slave servant sings her own story of toil, hardship, disease, and death. As the smoke clears, Lincoln’s emancipation proclamation appears overhead. Everyone comes together to turn toward a “new light, lighting up the world” that must be passed on.

SCENE I: A Southern University Campus

Supertitle:

**A few days before the end of the Civil War,
a southern university anticipates the invasion of the Union army.
6:00 a.m.**

A short, pronounced drum roll precedes the scene.

Colonel Murfee: (to cadets sleeping nearby)

Roll Call! Everyone up!

Cadets! Gentlemen! Time to sharpen up!

*(aside)*The union army draws closer, closer...

Raids just north of here! They're breathing down our borders!

But we still have some muskets, *a little* bit of gunpowder...

and stockpiles of astronomy, logic and philosophy!

Oscar Ford: (complaining, immature, but eager to please)

drills drills drills

have been drilled into our bones

steps, steps, steps...

drills drills drills...

Pierpoint Phillips: (interrupting, confident, more mature)

They expected rowdy boys, spoiled rotten,

card-playing, whiskey-drinking...

Can you *now* imagine it?

They thought we'd spit on public floors,

even wear our hats indoors...

Colonel Murfee:

Thankfully, those days are gone.

Thanks to the President (no, I don't mean Lincoln!)

Our *university* President who

turned these boys into both scholars and cadets...

Oscar Ford and Pierpoint Phillips:

with riflery! Chivalry! Greek and Latin!

Oscar Ford:

Our aim

Pierpoint Phillips:

and brains

Oscar Ford and Pierpoint Phillips:

are deadly sure! Our voices sound like satin!

Colonel Murfee:

I gave up teaching math for this!
But, I do believe that
honor, plus duty, gunpowder and philosophy
will add up to our future when these troubled times are done.
Let's hope that homework's done!

Pierpoint Phillips:

Yes sir!

Oscar Ford:

Almost, sir...

SuperTitle:

7:00 a.m. in the chapel

Colonel Murfee:

Now it's time for prayers
and then a little breakfast

Pierpoint Phillips: (solemn)

Dear Father who art in Heaven
Hallowed be thy name

Oscar Ford: (dreamy, plaintive, complaining)

thy will be done...

(speaking quickly) and may it be this morning that some rashers from the 200 pounds of
bacon each of us was required to contribute when we were accepted to the Corps of
Cadets may see fit to fall in with the bread, rice, molasses

Pierpoint Phillips:

Thy kingdom come

Oscar Ford:

Thy bacon, please come...

Pierpoint Phillips:

Thy will be done

Oscar Ford:

I like it well-done!!

Pierpoint Phillips:

on earth

Oscar Ford:

and maybe a carrot if we're lucky

Pierpoint Phillips:
as it is in heaven

Oscar Ford: (more serious)
Will they go to heaven,
the boys who deserted us to enlist?

I can't even remember
the taste of butter

President Garland: (interrupting, off to the side, fiercely penning a letter)
“Dear Mr. and Mrs. Smith,
Your son says he cannot stand our discipline or our food.
He has determined to desert his post
and I have paid him fifty dollars to bear his expense and his sorry self
home!”

Pierpoint Phillips:
And deliver us from evil

Oscar Ford:
...and the Federal army

Pierpoint and Oscar:
Forever and ever. Amen. (*repeat*)

President Garland: (serious, to audience)
We must insist on cultivating thinking men
from which a harvest might be reaped
in more peaceful times...
Even if it means taking in boys of 14 years of age.

SuperTitle:
8:00 am
in a classroom

Bell signals start of class.
Cadets fall into seated pattern in front of their professor.

Oscar Ford: (mumbling, apologetic)
Professor, the boys want for me to, um, say...

Rev. Pratt:
Speak up! This is a class in oratory!

Oscar Ford:

Well, um, sir, sure, I mean...

Rev. Pratt: (interrupting him)

Rhetoric and logic!

Oscar Ford: (clearing his throat, steadying himself)

Where, we have been up quite late, of late... too late...

Whereas, this week, we have been called out due to more rumors of Union raids, and *Whereas* we have been guarding the bridge, sleeping on the ground (*yawns*)

our homework, is, um, not quite done!

Rev. Pratt: (majestically)

I understand, boys.

You are doing your best.

But, (*spluttering*) Go to the library! Get that homework done!

Cadets file off.

Oscar Ford and Pierpoint Phillips move toward the guardhouse as the light changes to evening.

SCENE II: North of the Bridge

SuperTitle:

The next morning.

Several miles north of the bridge.

Chorus:

Fifteen hundred men. (*repeats*)

Fifteen hundred horses. (*repeats*)

Oscar:

Fifteen hundred Spencer Repeating Rifles.

Charles Griffin:

General, sir, I have pressing orders.

General, sir, I have pressing orders from the Major General.

He said this *diversion* is especially for you.

He said this *diversion* is especially for you.

General John Croxton: (*reading the orders*)

“Proceed by direct route rapidly to destroy the bridge, the factories, the mills, and especially the university—a military school.”

SuperTitle

Sunset the same day

General John Croxton: (*Getting ready to lie down in camp*)

My men are tired.

We’ll rest now and take the city in the morning.

For now, I’ll send out a couple of men.

Our scout will show them the way to the bridge...

(Chorus tenors humming softly, getting ready to lie down.)

Jackson Miller (solo): (*looking around*)

I grew up right near here, picking white cotton,

lashed in white cotton, blood staining the cotton,

I grew up here where my mother was taken,

I grew up here but I was never a child.

Then, I escaped! I followed the Drinking Gourd!

Now I’m back to lead these Union boys.

(searching for the path)

I grew up here where my mother was taken,

I grew up here but I was never a child.

You see, I have become the Magician of Cotton,
parting the cotton and... Here! Look! The path!

You see, I have become the Magician of Cotton,
parting the cotton and... Here! Look! The path...

(Waterfall sound begins and continues to increase.)

Picking white cotton.
Blood staining the cotton.
Where my mother was taken.
But I was never a child.

(Suddenly finds the path and addresses Charles Griffin)
This way to the bridge!

(Sound of musket fire emerges.)

(Musket fire and waterfall sound gradually fade to nothing.)

SCENE III: The Guardhouse

SuperTitles:

Midnight.

The guardhouse on the university campus.

(Jack Rudolph is in the guardhouse and mimics playing one stanza of “Amazing Grace” on a fife. As he approaches the end of the stanza, two cadets join him there.)

Oscar Ford: (following the fife solo)

What a long night...

Pierpoint Phillips:

I'm still working on that analysis of Cicero!

Oscar Ford: (lying down)

I'll sleep the first shift.

Pierpoint Phillips:

I'll wake you when it's your turn.

(Oscar Ford sleeps. Pierpoint Phillips reads softly aloud from Cicero. Jack begins solo.)

Jack Rudolph:

Sold! the gavel said, to a so-called “gentleman”

But nothing is gentle about my life.

Sold! as a boy to this so-called “-man”

who beat me into playing fife so I'd fetch a higher price.

We play their music so they can march.

The fife has a melody they recognize.

We play their music so they can march.

The fife has a melody they recognize.

Rented out! now, to this so-called “university”

“Citadel of learning,” what do you know?

Rented out here, where the boys keep leaving
without ever studying the value of a life.

We play their music so they can march.

The fife has a melody they recognize.

We play their music so they can march.

The fife has a melody they recognize.

But the drums are the gavel,

the gavel in our hands,

the drums are the gathering, the burning,

and the roll call of the free!

We play their music so they can march.
The fife has a melody they recognize.
We play their music so they can march.
The fife has a melody they recognize.

They recognize.
They recognize!

*(Following the solo, Jack plays the 1st phrase of “Amazing Grace.”
As he finishes, the sound of horses’ hooves approach: a midnight rider—Dalton Yancy—arrives frantically.)*

Dalton Yancy:

President! President! They’re here! They’ve crossed the bridge! They are almost upon us!

President Garland: (*hugely commanding*)

Beat the long roll!

(Jack Rudolph “plays” the long drum roll.)

SCENE IV: The Wedding

SuperTitle:

The next afternoon, in the town.

(Captain Carpenter and Private Thompson are looking for a house.)

Captain Carpenter:

I'm a little nervous. Tell me how this sounds:

“Dear Miss Emily...”

Joseph Thompson:

That's a little formal for someone you're engaged to!

Captain Carpenter:

Oh, Glorious, Gorgeous Em!

I'll say that if she comes to the door and her mother isn't beside her.

Joseph Thompson:

She'll wonder what you're doing there

Captain Carpenter:

When the wedding was supposed to be three days hence!

Joseph Thompson:

But you are on leave from the commissary *now*!

Captain Carpenter:

My leave is very short and the times are very turbulent.

(He finds the address, knocks on the door)

(to audience) Now or never!

(Emily answers the door and he addresses her) Sweet Em, will you marry me?

Emily:

Yes, of course, I already said I would, what are you doing here?

Captain Carpenter:

Tonight!

Emily:

Tonight?

Captain Carpenter:

Tonight!

Emily:
Tonight?

Captain Carpenter:
This very night!

Emily:
This very night? Tonight?

Captain Carpenter:
Tonight!

Emily:
This night?

Captain Carpenter:
This night!

Emily and Captain Carpenter:
Tonight!

Emily:
Tonight?

Captain Carpenter:
Tonight!

Emily:
Tonight?

Captain Carpenter
Tonight!

Emily:
This very night?

Captain Carpenter:
This very night! Tonight!

Emily:
Tonight?

Captain Carpenter:
This night!

Emily:

This night?

Emily and Captain Carpenter:

Tonight!

Emily (*she turns to face the inside the house and addresses her mother*)

Mother! My Captain, my sweet James is at the door!

Mrs. Leach:

My daughter, who's here?

Emily:

Mother! My Captain, my sweet James is at the door!

Mrs. Leach:

But, daughter, what for?

Emily:

We must get married tonight!

Mrs. Leach:

Tonight?

Emily:

We must get married tonight!

Mrs. Leach:

Tonight?

Emily:

Tonight!

Mrs. Leach:

Tonight?

Emily:

This night!

Mrs. Leach:

This night!

Emily and Mrs. Leach:

Tonight!

Emily

Tonight!

Mother (to Harriet and Charlotte, who have come to join Emily):

Girls! Girls! Tonight! Tonight!
Girls! Girls! Spread the word!
Go find every guest! Go find every guest
and change the request
of their company to not then, but now!

Charlotte:

A wedding! A wedding! This very night!

Harriet:

Emily's wedding this very night!

Charlotte:

A wedding! A wedding! This very night!

Harriet:

Emily's wedding this very night!
I hope that mine is next!

Charlotte:

I hope that mine is next!

Harriet:

I'm next!

Charlotte:

I'm next!

Harriet and Charlotte:

I'm next!

Mrs. Leach:

Mix the cake and make it rise!

Emily:

I hope this dress is the right size!

Mrs. Leach:

Quick, produce a complicated feast!

Emily:

Salt pork, potatoes, and gravy, at least!

(SATB quartet)

Mrs. Leach and Capt. Carpenter:

Dream a fast dream of the perfect wedding party.

Emily, Mrs. Leach, Capt. Carpenter:

Let the bells, for once, have a moment to ring out

Emily, Mrs. Leach, Capt. Carpenter, Joseph:

Dream a fast dream of this perfect wedding party

Tutti including Chorus:

Joy is what this parenthetical hour is about

For the most handsome couple in the South.

Emily, Harriet, Charlotte, Mrs. Leach:

We can quickly gather the cake, the dress;

Joseph:

I can quickly gather the ring, the ale;

Tutti:

Quick, stuff an apple in the roasting pig's mouth!

We can light a starless night with joy and laughter

for the most handsome couple in the South!

(A quick, symbolic wedding takes place.)

Reverend McDonald:

Miss Emily, do you take this...

Emily: (interrupting)

Yes, I totally take this man!

Reverend McDonald:

And you?

Captain Carpenter:

Yes, oh yes, as quick as I can!

(Shots are heard nearby.)

Emily:

What shall we do?

(Mrs. Leach demonstrates to Harriet and Charlotte how to hide jewels or other valuables in their bustles.)

A Union Soldier: (bursting into the house and grabbing Captain Carpenter)

A prisoner of war! *(The soldier drags the struggling captain off stage.)*

Mrs. Leach:

Please, sir, eat all you like! Just don't kill anyone!

Why can't we go back to the way things used to be?

SCENE V: Moonscape

(Garland and Murfee are near the bridge, surrounded by their weary soldiers. It is the middle of the night and distinctly moonlit. As the scene progresses, the moon goes down and a pale dawn finally emerges.)

President Garland:

“Soon we will make our stand, boys,”
I told them and they believed me.
“We’ll point our cannons down on them!”
Their weary eyes believed me...

Colonel Murfee:

Time held its breath. The steely moment nigh.

President Garland:

Then we learned that our cannons had been captured!

Colonel Murfee

Our boys--so outnumbered
like a little handful of stars awash in darkness

President Garland (*resolutely, heartbroken*):

I could not let my boys be taken prisoner!
We had to retreat.

Colonel Murfee: (*bewildered*)

Boys, take a few hours of rest upon the ground.

President Garland (*beginning their duet, quietly imploring*):

First light, come shine on the world!
Shine on this river, and on these ancient hills.
Shine on the fallen, the named and unnamed,
on mothers South and North, weeping, unashamed.

Colonel Murfee:

First light, tell us what to do.
The smoke, the mangled limbs, the scene is not yet cooled.

President Garland:

Sometimes all the boys look like my own boy.

Garland and Murfee:

First light of morning, I’m weary of mourning.
First light, you’re what we’re fighting for.

(sound of large blazing fire growing in distance)

Colonel Murfee:

Look, my God!

The horizon is on fire!

President Garland:

Burning! Burning!

My home! My wife!

My children! My life!

Boys! Wake up!

Sound the long roll!

(Sound of long drumroll.)

SCENE VI: Library and Observatory

Observatory

(Once the music has begun, Charles Griffin and Henry Abernathy enter the observatory, are amazed by the equipment they find there, and begin to destroy it. Mrs. Chapman, hearing the destruction, rushes into the observatory.)

Mrs. Rueben Chapman:

Stop! What are you doing? Mauraders, thieves!

This is the great observatory, the window on the heavens!

God himself will have your heads!

Charles Griffin and Henry Abernathy (moving toward her, threateningly):

Move aside, Madam, we have our orders!

Library

Andre DeLoffre (to Colonel Johnston):

You can't destroy these 7,000—did you hear me?—
seven thousand irreplaceable books!

Observatory

Mrs. Rueben Chapman:

You have your orders?

SO DO I! Directly from God

who put the stars into the heavens...

Library

Col. Johnston:

Back before the war, when there was time for reading

I read a book a day. I read a book a day.

Late at night by lamplight.

DeLoffre:

A book a day, a book a night, so did I!

Books are how we tend to the garden of humanity.

Col. Johnston:

Books are how I travel all around the world!

Even at the height of this brutal calamity

I feel a humility

standing in the shadow of the books beneath this dome

a-flicker with thought!

DeLoffre and Evans:

Don't burn this fine library!

Observatory

Mrs. Rueben Chapman:
Stop! Marauders! Sinners! Thieves of Stars!

Charles Griffin: (*rushing past Mrs. Chapman*)
What's this?

Henry Abernathy: (*rushing past Mrs. Chapman*)
A telescope, they call it.

Charles Griffin:
And these?

Henry Abernathy: (*putting the lenses up to his eyes, being especially silly*)
Telescope lenses!
I say, chap, you look so far away!

Library

DeLoffre and Evans: (*repeating*)
Don't burn this fine library!

Col. Johnston: (*clear-voiced and proud, above all other sound*)
I will send a messenger to the General—
(*Paul Rivers, Union messenger, appears, ready to leave with the message*)
“May I save this building of no military value?”
(*to his messenger John Dupont*)
Go!! (*to Paul, who flees with the message*)

Observatory

Mrs. Rueben Chapman (*loud, definitive*):
God himself will have your heads!

Library

DeLoffre:
If you destroy this library...

Observatory

Mrs. Rueben Chapman:
What are the stars worth?

Library

Col. Johnston:
I'm waiting for an answer from the General

Observatory

Mrs. Rueben Chapman:
What are the heavens for?

Library

Johnston:
Who got his orders from the Brigadier General

Observatory

Griffin and Phillips: (repeating)
Now we're going to burn it down!
Torch it! Torch it!

Library

DeLoffre:
I've always loved the feeling of a brand new book

Observatory

Mrs. Rueben Chapman:
Where does man belong
in the dizzy, tangled heavens?

Library

Col. Johnston:
...who got his orders from the Major General

Observatory

Mrs. Rueben Chapman:
What pattern are we part of, that we are part of *this*?

Library

Col. Johnston: (sees Paul returning, shouting loudly above all other sound):
He's back! He's back!
(having read the message, aghast, stuttering):
"Burn it to the ground, and everything in it...the whole university."

Observatory

Mrs. Rueben Chapman: (heartbroken, momentarily calm)
I have hidden some lenses in the rubbish

Library

Col. Johnston: (calm, yet commanding)
I'll let you save one book!

Observatory

Mrs. Rueben Chapman:

The lens: a single eye that watches this scene

Library

Evans:

How do you know which book?

What is in one book?

(Library fire is set and escalates slowly.)

DeLoffre:

Far across the planet spinning through space,

distant cousins, my sweet fellow man:

the rarest of rare books

(beginning to swoon over the book's beauty)

this hand-illustrated,

embossed,

leather-bound,

exquisite edition:

I CHOOSE.... THE KORAN!

(runs quickly off stage)

Col. Johnston: *(loud, to Union soldiers)*

Boys, you have your orders!

Observatory

Mrs. Rueben Chapman

SO DO I! Directly from God

who put the stars in the heavens!

(sputtering, to soldiers) Get out of here!

You've done enough already!

Hideous arsonists! Executioners of sky!!

(Action halts to a strange and eerie pace, as though all is in slow-motion and seen from a distance.)

Chorus:

From space, if there were a thing called a rocket

the tiny beings in the rocket could see the

observatory standing

the slit of its domed eye

slid back so we can see

our curiosity

our sinning and our penance

our fury, our reverence.

Mrs. Rueben Chapman, (spoken softly, in rhythm):
May I live to see...

Chorus:
May we live to see

Mrs. Rueben Chapman:
The telescope replaced

Chorus:
The wounds of war erased

(Instantly, the action resumes at a frantic pace.)

Mrs. Rueben Chapman: (scolding the soldiers)
Don't let god see us
Don't leave us stranded
Don't take orders
Don't burn knowledge
Don't scorch the face of god!!

SCENE VII: The Mansion

(Union soldiers have entered the mansion. During the final part of the previous scene, they can be seen in low light, viciously gathering up furniture and throwing it into a pyre. Mrs. Garland and Caroline, during the end of the previous scene, are looking out from a high place and see flames in the mansion. They hurry toward it as the soldiers are starting to burn the furniture.)

Mrs. Garland:

DON'T!!!... *(This announcement should bring all motion and sound to an immediate stop.)*

DON'T... BURN... MY... HOUSE!

(Pause before continuing to duet.)

(Mrs. Reuben Chapman's last note in the previous scene was a F, one octave above Mrs. Garland's first note.)

Don't burn all I love.
The house of my children.
What is left to prove?
Smoke! smoke! Blood-colored flame!
More blood! Put it out!
Don't burn my home.
Don't burn my house.

Caroline:

I live behind this house in a dirt floor shack

Mrs. Garland:

It's the house of my children!

Caroline:

They took away my children.

Mrs. Garland:

Don't burn my house!

Caroline:

We built this house...
Plasterers and masons.

Mrs. Garland:

My sweet Rose, my sweet Rose
had a party here.
Strawberries, strawberries and ice cream!

Caroline:
Grits. Grits. Grits, if they fed us.
If they fed us. If they fed us.

Mrs. Garland:
Hmm... I read to my daughters here

Caroline: (*indignantly, becoming angry*)
Who do you think?

Mrs. Garland:
a book about a castle.

Caroline:
Who do you think built the bookcase for the castle?

Mrs. Garland (*angry and becoming furious*):
Put it out NOW.
Boy, do you hear me, boy? You! Boy!!

Caroline: (*turning from anger to tender recollection*)
I remember a boy named Boysey. Seven years old,
He lived. He lived in the basement, in the basement.
(*with growing resentment*) He died of whooping cough
in the basement, in the basement, of whooping cough.

Mrs. Garland:
I can hardly breathe.
The smoke is thick as thieves.
This is not the end. This is not the end. This is not the end.

Mrs. Garland and Caroline: (*simultaneously: sharp, articulate, and growing in fury to the end*)
(*Mrs. Garland*) Put it out! Put it out! Put it out! Put it out! Put it out!...
(*repeats eleven times*)
(*Caroline*) in the basement, in the basement, in the basement, in the
basement...(repeats eleven times)

Supertitle:
"... all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free." A. Lincoln

SCENE VIII: Epilogue and Prayer

President Garland (in the distance):

My love, can you hear me? My love, are you alive?

Member of Chorus:

All that we believed: is it all gone?

Caroline:

Nothing but labor, over and over...

Mrs. Garland:

Don't let it be over.

President Garland:

What is going to happen to all the boys?
I told them to disband. I hope they have a home.

Oscar Ford and Pierpoint Phillips together:

I'm going back home now.
I might come back... or I might just move on...

Mrs. Garland:

We have a home to go to!

Mrs. Rueben Chapman:

The heavens still shine! The stars are on fire but they are not falling down!

DeLoffre:

Who will write the book of what went wrong?

President Garland:

New light, lighting up the world!
Lighting up history! Witnessing, unfurl!
Light it with fire. Stoke it with hope.

Caroline:

I'll find my children somehow in the smoke.

Member of Chorus:

All that we believed: where will it go?

Mrs. Garland:

Don't let it be over.

General Croxton:

It's time to go home.

Caroline:

New light, lighting up the world!

Jackson:

Moonlight retreats,
and the smoky dawn unfurls...

Jack:

Shine on this story, shine on the world.

Caroline and Jackson:

New light, come shine on the world!

Caroline, Jackson, and Jack:

Shine on this crossing. Shine on these hills.
Shine on the fallen, the grieving, the maimed.
Shine on every hope, every bullet, every name.

Chorus SATB:

Bring this light to the world.
Save our story of heaven and home.
Open your heart, fling wide every door,

Jack:

and move on, cross this bridge and move on,

Caroline:

into the centuries

Jackson:

remembering this one

Chorus SATB and Caroline, Jackson, Jack:

Brick by brick. Fire by fire.
Dream by dream, dawn by dawn,
move on.

(In succession: stage lights out, torches out, conductor's stand light out.)